

Thinking about life and species lines with Pietari and Otto (and garlic breath)

PAULIINA RAUTIO

University of Oulu, Faculty of Education

Introduction

Concepts can be thought of as *answers to questions posed by the world*. Concepts are answers inasmuch as they are particular ways of thinking about and acting within the world – to the exclusion of others. In some cases we have grown accustomed to certain answers or conceptualisations to the extent that the original questions are no longer easily available. For example, having grown up and been educated in a Nordic welfare state context of post-enlightenment era anthropocentrism and natural scientific rationality (Snaza et al. 2014), like the generations before me, I tend to keep falling back to the concepts of “human” and “animal”. To get to the question of animate life on Earth, and then to envisage new answers, is to overcome decades of sedimented ontologies – settled ideas, lived constructs and understandings of what it is to be human, what it is to be

an individual defined by the construct of species.

This paper is dedicated to my non-human/more-than-human co-authors Pietari of the *Columbae* family and Otto of the *Corvidae* family. Together we write about how the notion of “life” can be understood beyond species categories, beyond individual bodies and beyond linear time. That is, when “a life” refers to something shared, something multiple, rather than something singular. We also write about and take up concepts as methods in a multispecies inquiry (Rautio, *in press*). In this paper, multispecies inquiry is not only an inquiry with and between species but inquiry into the very idea of there being multiple species – it is a deconstruction and a reconsideration of life divided by species lines.



Thinking with taxonomies

Modern taxonomy is based on similarities among organisms that reflect as if a vertical descent from recent shared ancestors (e.g., bird wings and human arms point to a common vertebrate ancestor). Another and equally possible way to classify would have been to base taxonomy “horizontally” on similar solutions to environmental challenges (e.g., grouping birds and insects together because they have wings). With the current system, biologists are able to draw evolutionary tree diagrams that depict how existing organisms relate to one another in a linear, progressive timescale (e.g. Gaylord Simpson 1990; Mayr 1982). With the alternative system, diagrams could be made that depict how existing organisms are related in shared time and space: as “common world” communities (see Latour 2004).

The modern taxonomical system, set up by Carl Linnaeus in 1735, has prevailed because it is simple and practical: every species can be given a unique and stable binomial name: a universal label of identification referring to a *kind* of being, rather than to an individual being. *Columba livia* is Latin for “bluish dove” whereas *Corvus frugilegus* is latin for “food-gathering raven”. Given names tend to become naturalised easily, and so species names such as “pigeons” or “rooks” seem to precede the actual birds: as if the names were there first and then the birds

were identified as matching the names, instead of vice versa.

Take the classic case of the platypus (Grant 2007; Moyal 2001; also Latva 2016). When it was first found in eastern Australia at the end of the 18th century, the Linnaean system had been in place for just a few decades but had firmly established itself and set out to replace earlier forms of classification. Platypuses, however, defied these new taxonomical categories of the animal kingdom fiercely, just by being the kinds of beings they are. They were mammals, yet laid eggs. They had bills like ducks but tails like beavers. And so, when platypuses were sent over to Europe by early naturalists of the late 18th century – as dead specimens – other scientists would for the longest of times suspect an elaborate hoax. People would rather believe a system of classification taken up just half a generation earlier than a real live being splashing in the waters of eastern Australia and Tasmania. A living being (albeit dead on inspection) did not, could not exist, if there was no category for it. It had to be a hoax (Moyal 2001).

Our need to make sense of other life on Earth (in order to control, predict, utilise and exploit, *but also* to protect, befriend, work with and share lives with) has given rise to differentiating concepts such as “species”. According to the currently widespread ontological stance in biology, species don’t really exist out there in reality but are rather imposed on

that reality by us, as conceptualisations (Mallet 2001). Hence there is a problem, referred to as the “species problem” (e.g. Robson 1928; Pigliucci 2003; see also Stamos 2003), of defining which organisms belong to which species. And so the tools and the vocabularies proliferate (Sokal & Crovello 1970). The numbers and binomial names of species keep changing, there are cryptic species, sibling species, species aggregates and superspecies (e.g. Haveman 2013). Hybridisation of species leads to blurred species lines.

Rather than being only a stubborn and conservative effort to positivistically categorise the lives of other beings, the species problem also gives rise to fundamental philosophical discussions involving debates between realism, nominalism, pragmatism, pluralism and monism (Pigliucci 2003).

Thinking with pigeons and crows

Systematic species categorisations give rise to various forms of governance and of relating to the species in question. Thinking with “pigeons” and “crows” is thinking with these forms of governance, with the cultural, historical and political birds.

The bird individuals identified as pigeons or crows are, at species level, common even globally. The distributions of both species can be visualised on a map and their conservation status estimated,

because they have been recognised and universally named via the binomial taxonomical system. Both are species currently listed under “least concern” in the International Union for Conservation of Nature Red List (IUCN Red List), an institution whose existence depends on a universal classification system.

The lives of birds classified as pigeons or crows are of the least concern in many ways. From a conservation point of view, their populations are thriving and there is little need for protection. From a cultural point of view, both species are often viewed as a nuisance and generally believed to be dirty and spread disease (Jerolmack 2014). And from a legal point of view, pigeons, crows, certain gulls and fieldfares belong to the category of “unprotected animals” in the Finnish hunting act, and can be freely shot outside their breeding seasons. “A life” receives its form and content according to species lines: a life is inextricable both from an individual being and from the kind of species that individual belongs to. If the species lines had not been established and sedimented as common sensical, cultural and political frames of thought, could “a life” be conceived otherwise? Could we count lost lives or saved lives in another way? Could we fight for, protect, cultivate, govern and regulate lives in other ways?

“Human”, “pigeon” and “crow” are all answers to a question about animate life on Earth, as well as answers to the

ecologists' "species problem": "What are lives?" As answers, they propose only one possible way to conceive "a life". This way is defined by species categories, which in turn are defined by morphological and phylogenetic markers. A life unfolds in linear time, with a distinct beginning in "a birth", and an ending in "a death", defined by the existence of a single organism. But no being survives or leads "a life" without that life being sustained by other organisms. And so the species problem is a genuine problem, simultaneously both empirically and philosophically. Different answers to it produce different real life experiences and conditions for experience, literally sustain some lives and cast others as lives of "least concern".

The species of least concern are often the kind Jamie Lorimer (2014) defines as awkward. By this he refers to a sense of mutual vulnerability. Species such as pigeons or crows, who share our everyday life environments, perch on our windowsills and eat from our trash cans, are both close and distant, intriguing and disturbing – both *in our face* and as species of the "least concern" almost non-existent. Leaning on Judith Butler in their writing on humans and bees, Kelsey Green and Franklin Ginn (2014) discuss shared but unequal vulnerabilities between species and arrive at the insight that vulnerability is a condition of receptivity.

If we seek to listen to what the world speaks to us, as Nathan Snaza and

John Weaver (2016) suggest, we need to attune to it, or as Tim Ingold (2000) has it, to attend to it. Both attuning and attending can be understood as methods of understanding or tuning into how something *not-self* is *similar to your self* and tending that *not-self as part of your self*. Tuning and tending are practices or methods that don't require species constructs. On the contrary, they require you to understand yourself not primarily as a member of the species "homo sapiens" or "human" but as a responsive being irrespective of species. This is not necessarily a strangely metaphysical attempt. It can be a question of simple reframing. What if you defined who counts as your family by including all who eat from the same fridge? What if you defined your kin by thinking about who share and get by with the particular environmental conditions in your neighbourhood (in my case the harsh winters and darkness)? What if you bonded with all who have garlic breath?

Thinking with Pietari and Otto (and garlic breath)

All of this thinking begun to exponentially unravel just a few months ago when Otto was perched on my shoulder and I smelled garlic on his breath. But before Otto, there was Pietari.

Three years ago my partner received a phone-call late at night from the city harbor. A set of containers were to

be loaded onboard, but one had a bird's nest on top, along with two recently hatched birds. Since the nest could not be moved to a better location for the mother to find, my partner brought home with him what turned out to be two pigeons. At two weeks old, they needed liquid feed – and they needed to suck it as if from their mother's throat. We made up a formula of crop "milk" and turned a little rubber airbrush pump into a container from which the pigeons could suck the feed. We lost the other pigeon soon to an unknown cause but the other one kept growing. We named him Pietari (Peter). The feeding became easier once he started pecking food himself. But by the time he was a fledgling and about to be set free, two things had happened: first, the early Northern Finnish winter had turned unusually cold; second, his tail and wing feathers started to snap in two, having grown too weak in the few weeks we had to feed him with our insufficient human-made formula. Unable to fly because of the broken feathers and having been used to room temperatures, he couldn't be set free in the freezing cold winter. He stayed with us and chose to make a nest in a basket we have for woolen hats and mittens.

Pietari, who we first thought was male because she seemed to display to me, begun to lay eggs. And so I turned from a female mate to a male mate overnight – queerly assuming and assembling

a multispecies transgendered bond. Pietari would coo and squat for me – and only me – waiting for me to mount her by pressing my fingers on her back. She would reward me with two perfect white eggs, always laid in the mitten basket. I would see my two children off to school in the morning with their hats and mittens on, listening to Pietari make cooing sounds in the background, watching over her two eggs. We were all fascinated and amused by what we called a family-within-a-family.

I once walked along a path in the woods with Pietari sitting on my shoulder. She would take off and fly ahead for about 50 meters, land on a branch to wait for me, and when I got closer she'd land back on my shoulder, only to take off, fly ahead and wait for me again. This was our multispecies way of moving. It was an entirely new rhythm to me and to her, but soon our very different ways of moving were proceeding in sync, as if with a blended, hybrid species. As if there were no two species to blend to begin with. Only two beings creating *a life* as they went.

With the approaching spring, we would take her out to fly. But she'd always follow us back in. She would respond to my cooing and calls whenever within hearing distance. She would perch on my shoulder and sleep while I watched late night TV. At one year old, she suddenly became ill and died in a matter of

days. My sense of loss was overwhelming compared to the dismissive responses from humans other than my family members – she was “just a pigeon”. I didn’t relate to the phrase “a part of me died”, I rather felt that I had died. Period. This was the first push towards thinking about and reconceptualising “life” beyond an individual’s corporeal, linear existence.

The second push came two years later in the form of a rook. Otto was a fledgling when he came to us earlier this year. He had been found hopping around someone’s backyard, apparently with no parents around. At first we were skeptical, sure that the parents were taking care of their young and that humans had yet again “rescued” a baby bird for no reason. But it soon turned out that something had indeed happened to Otto’s parents, as he hadn’t been fed and was starving. He grew up with us, in our outdoor aviary we have for bird patients. I tried to stay distant, so as not to habituate him to humans, but it was hard. Rooks, as corvids, are intelligent and bond easily and intensely. As soon as we found out that the starving had weakened his wing feathers and he was unable to fly, I gave up trying to avoid eye-contact with him. He continued to live outside but roamed free in our back garden, sleeping in the chicken coop with the chickens (his choice). I would take him inside our house every day to play, talk to, feed and just keep company. He would sit on my shoulder

or on my head as I was writing. He had a special voice with which he would “talk” to me. He recognised his name and would respond to my calls in the garden.

One day, not too long ago, I was sitting down writing this paper with Otto perched on my shoulder. His breath smelled of garlic and felt warm on my cheek. I was blissfully confused and happy. As incredible as it sounds, I had not thought a bird’s breath could have a smell. But of course it could. My breath matched his as he had eaten the leftovers from our dinner. In that moment, a scent of garlic overruled decades of sedimented thinking about species divides. I wasn’t confused as to what species I belonged to, nor did I confuse Otto as a human being. Those divides simply held no power of presence or of explanation to our shared garlic breaths.

Otto grew up to be a very special part of my life. And then just as with Pietari, one day he suddenly fell ill and his condition deteriorated in just a day. I sat with him for the last three hours of his life, of our life. He died in October, on my bed under a light blanket, from what we now know to have been an intestinal infection.

Peoples’ experiences of very close relations with other animal individuals are often explained dismissively as anthropomorphism, the attribution or projection of human characteristics onto individuals of other species. Widely seen as unfortunate

and erroneous, anthropomorphism is despised as anthropocentric and just plain self-centered (Serpell 2003). But the entire notion of “anthropomorphism” relies on the construct of species – rather than the relation between two persons.

Kay Milton (2005) addresses this flaw when she writes about how non-human persons are perceived by human ones. She proposes that instead of anthropomorphism we entertain the idea of egomorphism. She points out that what anthropomorphism logically means is the attribution of characteristics that belong *only* to humans to nonhumans. In other words, the preliminary assumption is made that the animal concerned does not have these characteristics. The logic of anthropomorphism is based on exclusions and difference, and on species divides. But this is not how we form relations with persons. We rather look for characteristics that we share, recognise and/or value.

We (humans) don't understand other persons (human or non-human) through our specific *human-ness*, the construct of a species. Rather we understand others based on personal experience of them, or because we perceive certain characteristics in them, not because we ourselves attribute characteristics to them (Milton 2005, 260). We engage in egomorphism rather than anthropomorphism, as Milton suggests (*ibid.*, 261). Egomorphism means that we use our

personal experience, of what it is like to be a living being, to understand others. In other words, I understand Otto and Pietari, my dog, a polar bear, or another human on the basis of my perception that they are “like me” rather than that they are “humanlike”. That they suffer, rejoice, feel hunger, face difficult situations and overcome them, sleep, have sex, communicate with others, can be hurt, are vulnerable. Can and will eventually die.

Conclusion on a multispecies inquiry

With regard to the species problem, John Weaver and Nathan Snaza (2016) discuss methodocentrism in human sciences as the belief that certain preformed methods can guarantee the validity of investigation by situating the human observer, disinterested, outside the world under study. Weaver and Snaza suggest that the anthropocentrism of methodocentrism can be countered by practicing a science of embeddedness, by realising that there is no such thing as “human” as an isolated organism or entity. This, for Weaver and Snaza, requires methods that are not pre-planned but emerge during the research process and return it to “the risk of letting the world speak” – letting it question us, ask questions that may make us vulnerable and even, in the face of other urgencies, sometimes of “least concern”.

At the moment I understand multispecies inquiry, sometimes called

multispecies ethnography, as a sustained practice of egomorphism: a practice of understanding other beings through exploring and even creating likenesses; a practice of patient mapping of the cultural, historical, societal, discursive and ma-

terial conditions that might stand in the way. In other words, a practice of becoming intensely aware of the ways in which we habitually perceive and categorise others.

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